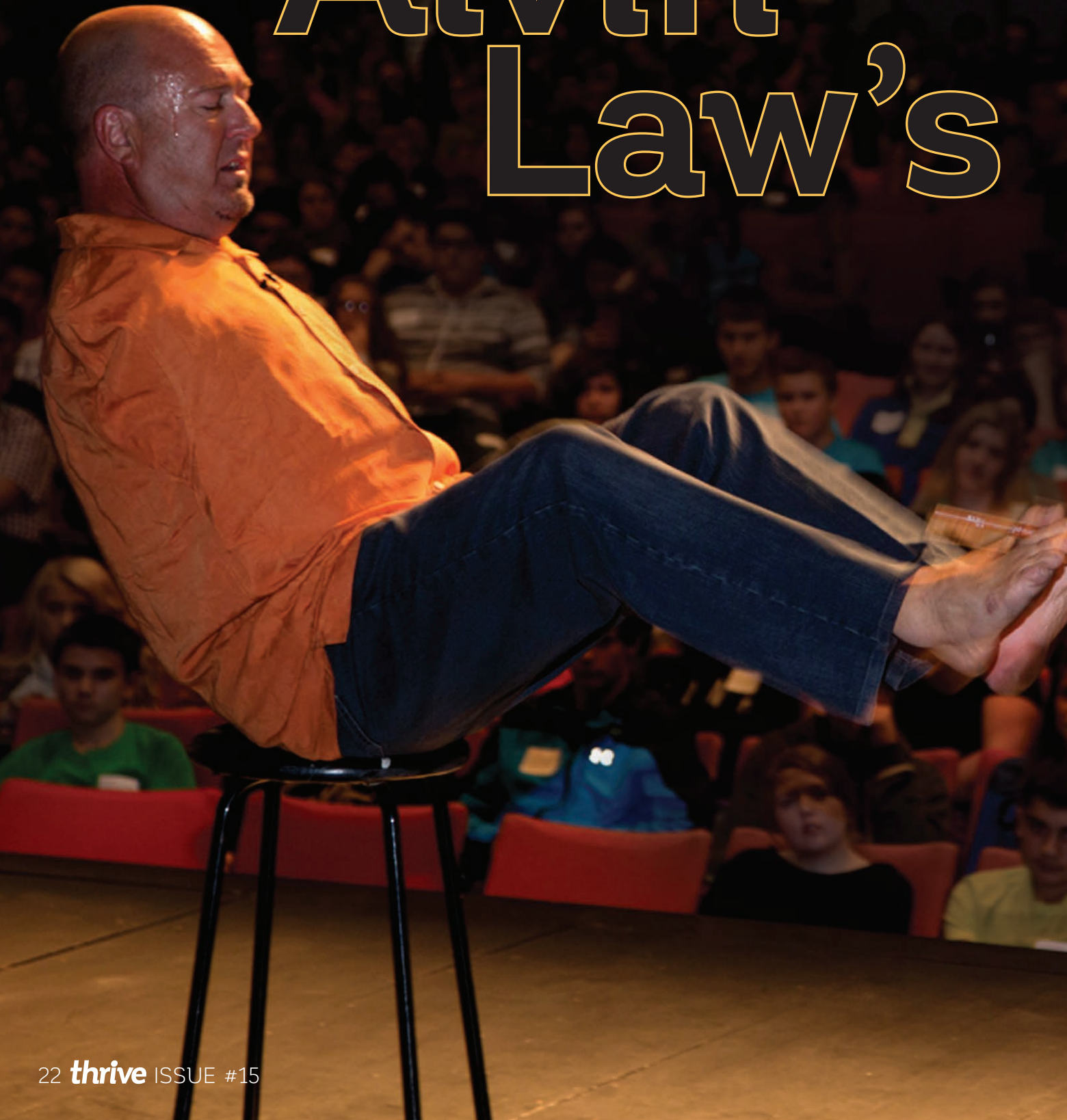


FEATURE

PASSION, PERSPECTIVE & PURPOSE

# Alvin Law's



# RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

By Max Warfield

**Alvin smiles a handsome smile, our first conversation leaving me feeling like I had just found a long-lost friend. He had just revealed to me what his purpose in life is, a goal I had heard before, but coming from this man it rang so genuine it sounded brand new.**

For Alvin Law, the pleasant expressions come easily, arriving from confidence earned from a lifetime of achievements — and he isn't slowing down at age 60. Many have considered his daily existence a triumph, a thalidomide baby, a boy without arms; but not Alvin. Many would have been afraid of city schools, feared the stacked competition, dreaded the possibility of mean-spirited teasing and bullying awaiting there; but never Alvin.

Some might have contrived a gig for giving happy speeches, playing on sympathies and saying cheerful words in order to grab a cheque; but those are not the thoughts of anyone fortunate enough to have enjoyed the creativity of Alvin's presentations throughout his Hall of Fame career as a speaker. He possesses real power. So then, what makes Calgary's Alvin Law so different?

"My mom and dad were more incredible than I will ever be," Alvin explains. "I talk about them a lot. I would not be who I am without them. When I speak to corporate groups, a decided fitting personalization is to call my mom my first CEO. She created a culture and a mood in our home that good CEOs create in their companies. Most CEOs want more from their people than they think they can give."

Alvin's birth-mother gave him up for adoption to Jack and Hilda Law, an act for which he says he is grateful.

"My adopted mom had no guilt. She and dad were profound, old school, salt of the earth, hardworking people. They simply believed, 'hey, there are kids who don't have homes, there are kids who are being abused — and we have two empty beds. There's something wrong with that.' Others might take in rescue pets. My parents took in rescue children. A lot of them were First Nation kids."

Alvin explains that there were a lot of problems on the reserves and kids had nowhere to go. They were removed by social services and had to live somewhere. "My parents became quite well known by the social services community and that's how I got there. When I came to live with them it was supposed to be temporary, like with the other kids."

Most kids stayed at the Law home for maybe a month at the longest. Alvin was supposed to stay a month, but ended up staying forever. "Mostly because there was no alternative," he shares, "but my mom and I had a connection. They kept me, which meant they were not embarrassed by my lack of perfection. When they would go shopping, they would take me. When they would go to the bowling alley or curling rink, I would go along."

The Laws resided in Yorkton, Saskatchewan, in the early '60s, a honourable town where they always had little Alvin's back. As a little guy, he wore a persistent smile and was outgoing. "I was in the community constantly," continues Alvin, "and because my parents were who they were, their friends, which were many and from all classes, would say, 'hey, let's help the Laws take

care of this little boy'. Most of them were grandparents. I was constantly around people who were not complaining about the world in which we live. That's not how they did things."

The optimistic outlook of those around him took hold in Alvin and grew deep roots. "My parents were involved in the lodge and the church and had a very positive nature. Yet, they pushed me with tough love, no coddling. Mom made me dress, eat and even sew using just my feet."

It was 1968 when Alvin asked for a Frisbee. His mom didn't challenge him — didn't ask what a kid with no arms would do with it. Money was

tight. She bought it anyway and told Alvin not to lose it in the backyard. "It was special to me," Alvin recalls. "A cherished memory. Over time I became skilled with it. It helped me gain strength in my ankles. As an adult, I threw one 250 feet at Taylor Field in Regina! I throw a disc to this day. It's a favorite plaything for my collie Murphy too."

Yorkton, despite its challenges, was good to Alvin. "The first time I was made fun of was when I was six-years-old by a kid who didn't know me; a boy who ended up in trouble his whole life. I wondered why someone would be mean to me."

The Laws lived directly across the street from the elementary school, but the school wouldn't let Alvin enroll at first. His dad, being the manager of a service center and carrying the mindset of a mechanic, said, "Wait a minute, he needs to go to school; let's fix this!" His dad convinced the school that Alvin belonged with the others. "Back then," Alvin remembers, "kids like me went to special-needs holding cells. That's what they were. There wasn't a curriculum. The setting was more like a daycare facility for someone with a body difference."

Alvin is convinced that his gritty upbringing is the key to his success. "It takes more than giving birth to earn the title of 'mom' — my mom, Hilda Law, made me do everything and never felt guilty about it. My mom was much older than other moms of kids my age which gave her a richer sense of refinement and experience. I would have to do the dishes or mow the lawn or shovel snow like other kids. When some people driving by would see me shoveling snow with my chest they'd say, 'What kind of horrible people are the Laws? That armless child is being forced to shovel the sidewalk!' I never looked at it that way. Chores for me became 'there's another thing I can do.' And the more things I could do, the more confidence I'd have. The more you believe, the more you *can* do anything!"



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*“For me a down day is not about arms, but being human — everybody has them.”*

Alvin’s life most certainly wasn’t always a straight line to his successes. He was bullied later at school, but would always stand up for himself by using his toes to throw rocks back at the tormenters. “Another unpleasant experience I had was feeling like a guinea pig with the medical community. They had no record of people being born without arms. They treated me more like an object, but without intentional meanness.”

The German drug Thalidomide was marketed in the early 1960s as a cure for morning sickness. It is considered to be the worst medical disaster in history. Tragically, over 13,000 babies around the world were born without one or more limbs, or with limb differences. Initially it fit in with the post-war era, where routine use of tranquilizers and sleeping pills was common. Thalidomide was the only non-barbiturate sedative known at the time. Advertised as “completely safe” for mother and child, “even during pregnancy,” its makers “could not find a dose high enough to kill a rat.” Worldwide sales rivaled aspirin.

Law was in his late twenties when he was featured in John Zaritsky’s 1989 film, *Broken Promises*, the promise being the Canadian govern-

ment’s commitment made 25 years earlier to support Thalidomide victims and their families. As the saga lingered and new facts were uncovered, Zaritsky made a Thalidomide trilogy, adding *Extraordinary People* in 1999 and *No Limits* in 2016. Back in the 1980s, Alvin doubted his story would fit the director’s goals, as he told them, “My story is not a sad one.” He did however, advocate for victims, forming the Thalidomide Victims Association in 1987 with four others.

Zaritsky’s investigation discovered documents that his film claims reveal that the drug manufacturer knew months before putting Thalidomide on the market that the drug would produce malformed babies – yet still went ahead and made fortunes off the drug. The drug company Grunenthal still operates today. In the early ’60s, they sent free samples to thousands of doctors and licensed the drug to companies around the world, including in Canada. While promoting his film, the St. Catharines native said, “The great historical irony for me was, the very first people Adolf Hitler and the Nazis rounded up weren’t Jews, gays or gypsies; they were disabled and handicapped people — to purify the race. Then after the war they

were creating all these children with disabilities as a result of their pursuit of profits.”

In school, Alvin found his true passion. “In 1971 my mom got a phone call that went: ‘Hello, my name is Blaine McClary. I am the band director calling to let you know that your son got a 96 on his music aptitude test.’ Mom said, ‘Oh wow!’ He said, ‘With that kind of mark, we would love to have him in the band program.’ Mom said, ‘That’s a really great idea. Do you have an instrument in mind?’ And he said, ‘No, with that kind of talent, he could excel at anything. So why don’t we give him the instrument he wants!’ Mom said, ‘Huh, this is fascinating. I have a question for you — have you met him?’ ‘No, I have a bunch of phone numbers here and I’m calling moms to get permission.’ ‘You have my permission; but do you know that he doesn’t have any arms?’ There was silence. He said, ‘No.’ and politely hung up.”

Six weeks later, Mr. McClary called back. He’d come up with an instrument. He had mounted a trombone onto a chair with a bracket, clamps and metal rods. It was Alvin’s first instrument.





“I really wanted to play piano,” Alvin confesses, “but a piano teacher in town said that was stupid because my toes were too short. Mom and dad decided I would be in the band. I had taken tap dancing. I had been in choir. I then started to play trombone and it became everything. I started going to jazz band camp and I began goofing around with the drums which was natural for me. Dad said I used to hold wooden spoons and bang on pans. I play drums to this day. Eventually, I went back to piano and learned it too.”

On his childhood street, the other boys were always playing rowdy

games. “I was never into sports. I love watching. I’m a big CFL fan... Saskatchewan Roughriders of course. But dad wanted me to play hockey. I joined the kids playing road hockey to please him. A neighbourhood thing. I couldn’t carry a stick, so I played goalie. Dad would look out the window and say, ‘that’s my boy!’ It was that, and not, ‘I hope he isn’t getting hurt by the streaking balls aimed at his face!’ The joke was always, ‘how about soccer?’ But the secret to my life was band.”

Alvin was given a gift for seeing things optimistically, and for music, two talents he has nurtured and

cultivated, sweated over and toiled to improve upon with zeal, as if God once stood before him with a golden platter and presented both with formality. He is also deeply philosophical on opportunities and how life events come about.

“All of these things happened not because of something I did. Mr. McClary opened that door. It’s kind of cosmic because I believe you get what you give out. When I wander around the world, I am always generous to people... giving, answering questions. When asked ‘What happened to you?’ I will explain it. So, when you carry with you an energy for life — that you love life — you end up, not by coincidence, coming into connection with other similar mind-sets. I think that is why things present themselves to me. I can’t explain how it happens. It just shows up.

Alvin did well in school and chose a career in broadcasting, earning a college degree while disc-jockeying at a radio station and calling sporting events. He was good enough to be considered for a TV anchor position, but management refused, unsure of how the public would react to an armless host. He wrote a book. He trained and became a certified fundraiser for charity.

To pursue his life’s dream of spreading his unique perspective as a motivational speaker, Alvin formed AJL Communications Ltd. in 1988. This allowed him to propagate his message of “Changing the Label” and accepting personal accountability to over two million people on five continents. He has earned the





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designation of Certified Speaking Professional, an honour possessed by less than ten percent of professional speakers worldwide. In 2009, Alvin was inducted into the Canadian Association of Speakers Hall of Fame. And in 2018, he was welcomed into the Canadian Disability Hall of Fame.

As a professional speaker, Alvin’s messages are not cryptic. “I think people are inspired about my presentation of life, and people are curious,” he observes. “The more we keep our mind focused on being present, being in the moment, being considerate to people, being polite – the better. This means you are observing, and not consumed by a hand-held device. I am always paying attention to people.”

Another lifetime highpoint is his appearance in the show X-Files. “I was brought in by producer Rob Bowman. Wickedest timing ever for a TV show. What that episode is known for is bending the rules and extending the boundaries of what the X-Files would be. The idea that they were putting people with disabilities on a mainstream TV show in 1996 was pushing all kinds of envelopes. When Bowman saw me on TV using my feet, he tracked me down to play the part of a preacher. They wanted an accurate presentation of somebody who had no arms and used their feet because it was a very common thing

to see at old-time sideshows. They would shoot an arrow or a gun with their foot, or play cards with their feet and people would pay to watch them. This episode had sophisticated humour, a lot of great irony. Dana Scully and Fox Mulder were made to look like the freaks and the performers the normal ones!”

Covid 19 has put Alvin in a holding pattern, halting gatherings and opportunities for work in 2020, but he sees it as an opportunity to enjoy time with his wife and Murphy’s wagging tail. He stays upbeat, but admits he deals with strife. “We have our down days. We struggle with our energy, with maintaining a positive approach. A down day can happen when something on social media makes me angry. For me a down day is not about arms, but being human — everybody has them. So I take my attention away from the negative, turn off social media, get away from the news and read a funny book or watch a funny movie, whatever it takes to change what I feel. Sometimes it can be music. We need more of these things that remind us we are human.”

Alvin speaks to the influence that his father had on him, how he would remind him not to be angry about having no arms, not to find blame for having no arms, and not to play the victim card. “I never did that once in

my life, yet that seems to be the way a lot of people live,” Alvin comments. “They play these cards: the race card, the sympathy card. They haven’t accepted their own lives; they pretend to, but they really haven’t.”

And Alvin’s purpose in life? With his unique passion he tells, “To give balance I want the positive I present to counteract all of the negative! Mom said, ‘you were born this way for a reason. Not to be a speaker, but just to be a good example.’ I found a career as a speaker and a writer, not only to balance the negativity, but to inspire people who feel that life is unfair. There are a lot of people who obsess with unfairness. All I know for sure is that you only get one life.”

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Max Warfield was born in Ridgefield, Connecticut, now making his home on the southern shores of Lake Ontario.



A correspondent for the *Lockport Union Sun & Journal* and the *Niagara Gazette*, Warfield has also written and published numerous novels.